



October 22, 2019

Chairman John Hoeven
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural
Development, Food and Drug
Administration, and Related Agencies
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations
Room S-128, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

Ranking Member Jeff Merkley
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural
Development, Food and Drug
Administration, and Related Agencies
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations
Room S-128, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

Chairman Sanford Bishop
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural
Development, Food and Drug
Administration, and Related Agencies
House Committee on Appropriations
2362-A Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Ranking Member Jeff Fortenberry
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural
Development, Food and Drug
Administration, and Related Agencies
House Committee on Appropriations
2362-A Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Hoeven, Ranking Member Merkley, Chairman Bishop, and Ranking Member Fortenberry,

As the House and Senate work together to pass Fiscal Year 2020 appropriations, we write to urge you to support robust funding for rural broadband. The House-passed Fiscal Year 2020 Appropriations bill for Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies includes \$605 million in funding for the Rural eConnectivity Pilot Program (ReConnect Program), which provides loans and grants to support rural broadband deployment. We are concerned to see that the current Senate Appropriations bill for Fiscal Year 2020 does not provide any new funding for ReConnect.

Affordable broadband access is critical for rural families, farms, and businesses across the country. It allows small businesses to thrive, farmers to use precision agriculture technology, students to complete their homework at home, and patients to access modern health care solutions. However, according to the FCC's 2019 Broadband Deployment Report, more than 25% of Americans in rural areas lack access to fixed terrestrial broadband at speeds of 25 Mbps download/3 Mbps upload, compared to only 1.7% of Americans in urban areas.

In Fiscal Year 2019, Congress appropriated \$550 million for the ReConnect Program. In the *Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018*, better known as the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress authorized \$350 million per year for a broadband loan and grant program. These efforts reflect a bipartisan consensus on the need to improve broadband access for rural Americans.

This year, USDA began accepting applications for the first round of ReConnect grant and loan awards. In this first application cycle, we saw approximately a three to one ratio in funding

sought to funding available. Given the demand for this program, we urge Senate and House Appropriators to include robust funding for rural broadband loan and grant programs in the final Fiscal Year 2020 Appropriations package. We believe that support for programs such as ReConnect and the 2018 Farm Bill broadband loan and grant program is critical to address the "digital divide" and ensure that our rural communities have equal access to opportunity.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,



Abigail D. Spanberger
Member of Congress



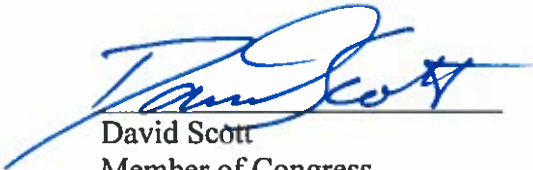
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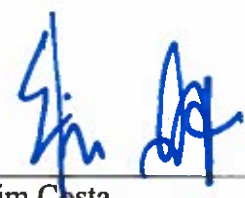
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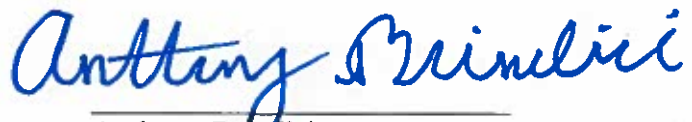
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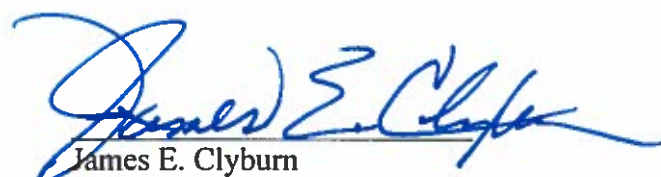
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